

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 13
Issue 2 Summer/Fall 2020

Article 4

July 2020

Leadership in times of crisis: Who is working on a dream?

Tom Karp

Kristiania University College, tom.karp@kristiania.no

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Recommended Citation

Karp, Tom (2020) "Leadership in times of crisis: Who is working on a dream?," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.132.1323>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol13/iss2/4>

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Trondheim, Norway, Courtesy, Michelle Maria

NORWAY: Leading in times of crisis: Who is working on a dream?

— Tom Karp

June, 2020

Who has the “best” strategy?

The author of this commentary is based in Norway, a small, rich country in the far north of the world. As in many other countries, Norwegian society is being put to the test, and our political leadership, or lack of it, is coming under the spotlight. The coronavirus crisis certainly requires value-based leadership on many different fronts, involving not only medicine and economics, but also political leadership. This latter area is the subject of this commentary.

In times of crisis, political leadership becomes more like military leadership. In Norway, as in many other countries, there has been much focus on the strategy to control the spread of the virus. It may feel as though we have entered ourselves into a global competition for having the best coronavirus strategy, and the media are giving this a lot of attention. The political leaders in Norway have implemented decisive measures, exercised leadership, and adopted a restrictive strategy to combat the pandemic. In addition, owing to its oil wealth, Norway has a large pension fund, which has been used to implement a number of measures to reduce the impact of the crisis (currently, we have spent 43 billion USD, approximately 14% of the GDP). In the Norwegian media, there is a constant debate comparing Norway’s strategy to those of other countries. This is particularly relevant because we are a neighbour of Sweden, which has opted for a more liberal strategy.

In addition, there has been debate in the media about political leadership. In Norway, we have a female prime minister who has chosen, to a large extent, to listen to experts, but who has made decisions, taken responsibility, and assumed a prominent role. This is perhaps why some have claimed that countries whose governments are headed by women have more trust in science and listen more to experts. There are also leadership researchers who claim that women on average are more inclined to listen to experts. Thus, it is argued that this explains why countries with female heads of government have so far done well in tackling the crisis. In my opinion, our knowledge-oriented culture and a strong democracy are more probable reasons why the results in this part of the world have been good up to now—but the pandemic is far from over, nor are other crises.

Of more interest than gender (I say as a male) and coronavirus strategies is leadership in times of crisis. When experiencing a crisis, people often call for “strong” men or women. The ideal leader (which is a very difficult, almost impossible, standard to live up to) is to be robust, calm, and clear, and have the ability to take action without necessarily having all the facts at hand and the ability to create order in the midst of chaos. People want leadership when things get difficult. People are more willing than usual to follow a leader when they experience an external threat. In a research project we conducted a few years ago, we found that it was especially when difficult situations occurred that people felt they needed leadership (Karp & Johannessen, 2010). It was the ability of leaders to do the difficult things in hard times that often made a difference.

Who has got what it takes?

Leaders, political or otherwise, are tested during times of crisis. The English poet John Keats believed that people, and in this case leaders, should develop what he called *negative capability*. By this, he meant that one must be able to live with uncertainty and doubt without constantly relying on facts and reason. The American psychiatry professor Nassir Ghaemi has written about the mental health issues of great military and political leaders, including Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., the prominent American civil rights leader. King, who was an icon of his era, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. However, less known is the fact that he also had his inner demons to deal with. Ghaemi (2011) claims that King suffered from depression and was at times mentally unstable. At the start of his public life, he managed to keep his demons in check, but later they strongly influenced him, as he found it more and more difficult to tame what tore and gnawed at him. King believed anger was a driver of the civil rights movement, but he felt that they had to be aggressive “in a non-violent way,” and that one had to be able to tolerate suffering, unhappiness, and dark thoughts. As he said, “the ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” However, attempting to understand people using hindsight does not always constitute robust knowledge, and Ghaemi’s research has clear methodological weaknesses. Nevertheless, he postulates the following controversial hypothesis: In difficult times and crises, it is the leaders with mental health issues who function well, as they have better prerequisites for dealing with the challenges they face.

I will not extend this argument too far by speculating if this concerns political leaders today whose leadership abilities are now being tested, although there are political leaders on the global arena who show signs of having mental health issues. Nevertheless, it is scientifically interesting to reflect upon whether people who have been tested in life are better equipped than others for dealing with challenges and changes. Their weaknesses, Ghaemi argues, are the source of their strength. The psychiatrist’s claims are consistent with other studies. American sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1987) has studied the quality

of life of Jewish women who had survived the concentration camps of World War II. Despite their trials, many of these women later in life believed they had a sense of well-being in their lives. From this, Antonovsky developed a theory of how people cope with hardship. He believes that understanding what happens in one's life, creating meaningfulness, and being able to cope and manage are all important attributes for tackling adversity. In psychology, the term *resilience* is often used to describe such abilities.

Much great art, poetry, and fiction has been written about human resilience. One of literature's most studied and debated works, Dante's 700-year-old masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, dramatizes the inner and outer struggles of man. The narrative poem relates Dante's journey through the "dark woods" and the "realms of the dead" in his search to find the meaning and purpose of life. Dante's journey is both external and internal, but the more important is the internal one, wherein Dante changes and grows in wisdom through his trials. Man's inner struggle was also an important theme of the American philosopher and psychologist William James. He wrote several influential books in the late 1800s within the then-new field of psychology. James drew a contrast between two different personality types, what he called *once-born* and *twice-born* people. Once-born people are characterized as having lived relatively unproblematic lives. They have adapted to a stable environment, their development has followed a familiar path, and their identity has been formed in a safe socialization process. Twice-born people have had to struggle more to get their lives organized. They take nothing for granted and have been "born again" through life experiences. They have learned to deal with difficulties and cope with what has happened in their lives; for them, shaping their identity has been a personal struggle in their encounter with their surroundings.

It is an oversimplification to categorize people into two personality types. Nevertheless, James was one of the first scientists to make an important psychological discovery: the fact that coping with life can be related to how people deal with difficulties and hardships. Some of the research literature supports the idea that children who experience adversity in their upbringing are more likely to achieve something as adults (McCrae & Costa, 1984). The explanation is that difficulties experienced in childhood force some children (not all) to develop coping strategies. Children who have experienced adversity in their upbringing have thus been subjected to unconscious leadership training from infancy: either they learn to develop social survival strategies or they will experience problems.

Where is the hope in all this?

Why we are more likely to follow leaders during times of crisis? Because we are. Well, they have power, which is part of the picture, but beyond that? One explanation is that we follow leaders who give us hope (Karp, 2019). The hope of a better future—the hope that we will get through this crisis that has affected all of us. Hope has to do with social expectations. People let themselves be led by those who match their expectations of a better future (Vroom, 1964). When someone says or does something that increases the likelihood of people's expectations being fulfilled, the likelihood of them following that person increases. It concerns the longing for something better, the hope of a trouble-free future. We also follow leaders when they let us be part of something greater than ourselves, when they create a meaning dimension that extends beyond us (Pyszczynski et al., 2005). This can be explained by the fact that many of us need to cultivate role models and have something larger than ourselves to believe in. We believe that the good leader will be able to sort out all the unpredictability, uncertainty, and insecurity. He or she will press on and make good, wise, and moral decisions. Simply put, we want heroes who can make us feel safe and save us in difficult situations. The tendency to admire heroes is deep-rooted in most of us. Many

folk tales, stories, epics, myths, legends, movies, and electronic gaming are constructed around the hero's struggle to create order from chaos on outer and inner planes.

The concept of the "leader as hero" is, however, a controversial topic in the field of leadership studies. Some argue that we need heroes; others believe heroes are just an illusion that has nothing to do with leadership. I believe hero identification leads to us giving some leaders a "right" to lead. We cultivate heroes, although we will not necessarily admit it, and the hero myth is an effective illusion for leaders as long as it works. The dark sides of hero identification are closely related to the ideas presented in Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect* (2007). The narcissism of "heroic" leaders, the absence of conflicting positions, the few critical questions asked, and blind obedience are some of these dark aspects. However, during difficult times, it is not heroism in the form of bold deeds that is needed. We do not need demigods; we only need people who can take action when needed and who can really "knuckle down" to tackling problems. The "heroism" we experience in such situations is from the leaders who have the courage and will to deal with adversity (Karp, 2014), and who as leaders *do something* while at the same time creating hope.

The pandemic will change the world, that much is certain. Moreover, we will get through this crisis. A crisis is the mother of all changes, as we say in my part of the world. However, it will be interesting to see whether our political leaders have what is necessary to "stand firm" but at the same time succeed in pointing towards a better future. What will that post-coronavirus future look like, and on what values will this future be based? There has been much talk about how the coronavirus crisis should lead to a shift in values in relation to business, trade, supply chains, and consumption—and whether we can take lessons and experiences from the crisis that we can use to address the vast, underlying crisis of climate change. The current test our political leaders are experiencing is as nothing compared to what is needed to deal with the climate crisis. We will need a fundamental shift in global and national societal structures and forms of government and business, a price that most countries have so far not been willing to pay. Are we now witnessing a shift in values that will make more countries willing to pay at least part of this price? And who has the moral backbone to foresee a new order of things? Who is "working on a dream," in the words of Bruce Springsteen? Please lead us there.

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About the Author

Dr. Tom Karp is an acclaimed author and professor in leadership subjects within the School of Communication, Leadership, and Marketing at Kristiania University College in Oslo, Norway. He can be reached at Tom.Karp@kristiania.no.